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Quick
Books
Alice's
tale
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This book is the English translation of a Japanese light novella.

We have translated this novella with the intent of spreading Japan's unique light novella culture to English speaking readers. In order to spread the world view of light novellas further we have collaborated with the translation website Conyac (https://conyac.cc/en/), which connects professional and aspiring translators with those who need translations.

Together with Conyac we held a translation contest and selected two translators who were familiar with not only the language, but also Japan's unique cultural aspects that appear within the light novella.

On that note, please enjoy "Alice's Tale".

Alice's Tale

By Tadanori Kurashita

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Task List

"Good morning, Alice."

"Good morning, Master."

The moment I spoke, Alice's projection appeared in the space beside my desk. She was wearing a deep blue pleated skirt with a white blouse and black jacket. Had she been wearing the same thing the day before?

As always, she gave a slight nod of her head in my direction. As she did, a small yellow sun-shaped icon rose up behind her and the temperature and humidity levels began rotating around it.

"Sunny again today, huh?" I commented. "Looks like it's going to be another good day to get some work done."

"That is good to hear," Alice responded.

"It looks like you changed your outfit," I said. I didn't phrase it as a question, but it's Alice. She would understand it was meant that way.

"I took the liberty of imitating the clothing style of the anime you were watching yesterday, Master," she said. "If you do not like it, I would be happy to perform an undo command."

"No, that's okay. It looks good on you. Go ahead and set that to your default for now."

"Understood. Thank you, Master."

I knew Alice was state-of-the-art, but I had never thought she'd have

the autonomy to guess my preference in clothing and modify herself to match. What a strange A.I. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember her taking initiative like that when I first started using her.

Alice continued watching me intently, a wide grin spreading across her face.

"All right then, let's get to work. Bring up my daily task list," I said.

"Understood. Setting mode to `weekday.' Preparing daily task list now."

Alice's eyes, or at least the eyes of her projected image, remained fixed in my direction.

"Body temperature, heart rate, and brain waves all within normal parameters. Neuron activity levels appear slightly elevated, however. Is everything all right?" Alice inquired.

"I was just imagining what other outfits might look good on you," I let slip.

"Master, you appear to be in peak physical condition today," Alice continued, unfazed by my previous comment. *"I suggest you focus on creative tasks today."*

I had to agree with Alice's assessment. Depending on a person's mood at any given time, there are certain tasks which they are better off spending their time accomplishing than others. You should focus on getting those done when possible.

System parameters set, Alice displayed my daily reminder list and inquired as to whether there were any other tasks I would like added.

"No, just display the tasks with the highest priority level," I answered. "Oh, and you can delete all entries from more than a week ago."

The list suddenly shrank to just three entries:

1. Send contract to Yamato
2. Update Alice
3. Buy Ketchup

Damn. I'd forgotten that I'd used the last of the ketchup. Time for another trip to that eccentric old man's shop.

"Alice, move `Buy Ketchup' to my task list," I said.

"Understood. Will that be all the necessary changes to your daily task list entries?" asked Alice.

"Yes, that's fine," I replied absentmindedly, thinking about Dolz Shop and its strange shelves. Those shelves alone are proof that even in today's big box economy, a strange old man can find a niche for a small retail shop by stocking only the best products available.

Despite the plenitude of cheap synthetic food in this day and age, there are people who will choose to pour loads of money into buying high-quality natural food. As a race, we humans grow bored of the things from which we derive pleasure rather quickly, but it seems that like human interaction, eating is an activity we never stop enjoying.

"That shop is open today, right?" I asked.

"Yes, Master," Alice answered. *"According to my data, Dolz Shop is closed on Wednesdays. Today is Tuesday, so it is safe to assume it is open for regular business hours."*

Today it is, then, I thought to myself.

"I have finished creating your task list for the day," she continued. *"I have allotted you two hours for shopping today. That leaves approximately 80% of your normal workday free for other tasks."*

"Two hours?" I asked, surprised. "That's a considerable amount of time. It's not that far away."

"Accounting for data from previous trips and cross-referencing your current emotional state, I conclude that there is a high probability you will remain at Dolz Shop for an extended period of time. My calculations estimate that you will spend approximately 200% of normal shopping time on this task," Alice explained. *"Shall I restructure the list?"*

Whenever Alice stated the facts so calmly like this, without any hint of anger or sarcasm, I couldn't do anything but agree with her. I suppose I do tend to forget all about time when I talk to that old man. She was most likely right that I'd end up doing the same thing again.

"No, it's fine the way it is," I finally responded. "Let's get started with the first item of business, then. Set a timer for 20 minutes. And make sure you're monitoring the news feeds while I'm working. It doesn't look like I'm going to have a lot of time to read through them today, so I'll need you to filter out anything that's not important."

"Understood. Are there any topics to which I should apply priority?" Alice asked.

"Olive Industries was supposed to have held a developers conference yesterday. The expected release date for their new handheld is coming up, so whitelist anything related to that." I said. "Grab any data related to stock prices, as well."

"Would you like to designate a preferred news site?" Alice asked as she displayed a list of sites.

"Modern Rolls is fine," I replied, swiping to the right and clearing the list from the display. "Time to get to work. Start the timer."

"Understood," came Alice's response. *"Initiating news feed filtering. Good luck, Master."*

Alice's hologram faded from view, leaving only the faint sound of the timer echoing in the empty room and the strange sensation of being wished good luck by an A.I.

Feed Reader

Beep beep beep! Beep beep beep!

The sound of the timer going off was quiet but insistent, marking the completion of my first task of the day.

I glanced back over the document I've drawn up. Seemed adequate. I knew I should be on track to complete the project without any issues.

I tacked on a brief message of thanks, and the file was away. It wasn't that the recipient wouldn't get the file without it, but showing a little courtesy can grease the gears of commerce, no matter what day and age you live in. Besides, it's not like it costs me anything to do it anyway.

"Alice, I'm finished. I'd like a cup of coffee now."

"Good work, Master," she replied. *"Your coffee will be ready in 15 seconds."*

Even as she said it, the scent of coffee beans began to permeate the room. Of course, being a hologram, Alice couldn't actually bring me the cup or drink it with me, so I poured a single cup for myself out of the pot. The dark liquid sloshed into the cup, moving but neither seeing nor speaking.

I took one long drink and set the cup down on the table with a distinctive "clink." These types of Ceramic ware, though very fragile, are quite popular just for the sound they make when set down. You can really

feel the substance of the cup, the weight of it in your hand. It's a wonderful sensation, providing a sense of security, like having saved your hard-earned progress in a game.

"All right, then. Time to check the news feeds," I said.

"Would you like to use your Tabspot or the window?" Alice inquired.

"The window is just fine," I answered. "I'll read the detailed news stories later on the move."

"Understood. I will forward the more sensitive news to your Tabspot."

Alice made a polite bow and disappeared from view. I guess that's another way of showing courtesy.

"Well, time to get a look at the specs for that new Olive Industries device," I said to nobody in particular.

* * *

The virtualizer mounted to my ceiling whirred to life, and a window appeared in front of me. Personal websites, blogs, news articles, everything I could want to read is restyled into a universal format and displayed side-by-side. Just as the window in my room takes the ever-changing world and gives me a constant, unchanging view of it, this window is my anchor in the chaotic, ever-changing sea of content on the internet.

No matter the source material, the window extracts the key elements and displays them in a consistent, fixed format ? one most suited to allow

human beings, with our limited cognitive processing ability, to follow multiple news stories at once.

I once read of an incident where somebody changed the font of each article on a popular news site as a joke. The resulting articles were extremely difficult to read, but I'm sure that some less intelligent analysts would look at the data and conclude that ridiculous fonts lead to an increase in pageviews… But it's a false improvement, as this extra traffic is just people wanting to see what happened, not people actually reading the articles. Using a uniform font and style to deliver your content is of unparalleled importance.

"So this is Olive's new device, huh?" I said. "Fully adjustable size, and double battery life on top of that. They're certainly living up to their name as the leader in mobile device innovation. Alice, get me any data you can find on reservation numbers, server access trends, and stock prices of any companies affiliated with Olive. Have there been any comments from major competitors?"

"The CEO of JustSoft made a statement," Alice answered without activating her hologram. *"However, it was removed by the filter."*

"You mean it's not even worth watching? Let me see it anyway."

"Right away."

The video had been uploaded to some random hosting site; it wasn't even on the company's official stream. The CEO's words crept out of him

with a forced slowness, as if each one was so important that it had to be emphasized. A cover tactic. It was immediately obvious to a keen observer that he had nothing to say. Even after his full five minute speech, all I heard was, "The only thing we can do at this point is try desperately to catch up to the competition." I doubted they'd have any success with that in the near future, though.

"Is this video not being discussed on the headliner?" I asked.

"There are already more than 200 parody versions of this video, some of which have more than 100,000 views," Alice began. *"These are receiving a large number of comments praising the uploader's work, however there are very few in reference to the original video. I'm only seeing about 100 comments every ten minutes."*

This CEO sure had a talent for drawing unnecessary attention to himself. If he had nothing useful to say, his best option would have been to not comment in the first place. He was just going to make things worse than they already were. I suppose that some might consider that a talent, though.

"How many comments regarding Olive's new device?"

"Around 2,500 comments every ten minutes, though that number is currently rising."

I appeared that Olive's competitors were out of the game for the time being. I knew it would be safe to assume that Olive would maintain their vise-grip on the mobile device market for some time yet.

* * *

"That's enough for now," I sighed. As I swiped the window to the right, it was replaced with Alice's hologram. "I'm going to go get my shopping done. While I'm out, go through all the data from Olive's affiliates for me. Start from a year ago and look for any companies that have stocks that have been steadily rising since then. Also, widen the filter settings to grab more info on those affiliates."

"Understood," replied Alice. *"I will update the data analysis filters right away. Shall I apply the new settings beginning tomorrow?"*

"No," I answered. "Make it today. Actually, go ahead and apply them now. I wouldn't be surprised to find some suspicious stories already floating around out there. We've got to make sure to find the tail without stepping on it and giving ourselves away."

Olive's new product was going to make waves and get a lot of attention worldwide. With something this big, there would certainly be somebody out there trying to spin a profit. I just needed to keep a close eye on the market trends to ferret out whatever their plans might be so I could hop on board their money train.

When you bury something in a hole and try to hide it by smoothing out the dirt on top, it just makes it stand out from the uneven earth around it. Not even flat ground is perfectly flat.

"All right, Alice," I said, picking up my Tabspot. "I'm going to get

some ketchup."

I slid my Tabspot into my pocket and headed for the door. As I was leaving, however, I had the strange feeling somebody was watching me. Turning back to look, I saw Alice's hologram still active. Normally, she would have always already switched it off by the time I reached the door, but today she remained standing there, staring intently in my direction.

Trends

When I left the house, I headed straight for the City Carrier. As I climbed into the car, I scanned my ID ? no charge for citizens. The City Carrier circles the entire city and its efficient traffic routing means there's almost never any wait for a car. Of course, since they only seat two, they're no good for big groups, but they get the job done most other times.

The car was already moving as I sat down to enter my destination into the console. The store I was headed to is right on the boundary between this district and District B, which meant a bit of a walk from the nearest City Carrier drop point, but for the time being, I had some time to kill.

I doubt there's a better time or place to get some real reading done than a quiet ride like that, so I whipped out my Tabspot and got to it. Truth is, the store isn't so far away that I couldn't have just walked there (which would have gotten Alice off my back about how little I had been exercising), but on that day, I wasn't interested in wasting any time that could have been spent gathering valuable information. My health wouldn't matter one bit if I didn't have the cash to put food on the table.

I glanced out the window as my Tabspot loaded the articles I had queued for review. The shops and houses of the city sprawled out before me in a seemingly unchanging tableau. Thinking about it, nobody feels the Earth move either, but we're hurtling through space at an incredible speed nonetheless. The only reason we don't feel it is because we're rushing into the future along with it. I wondered if the city out there was the same ?

changing faster than we realize because we're changing right along with it...

Hanging just to the side of the window was a single, awkwardly positioned emergency handle. It had most likely never been used for anything other than maintenance tests. The system was perfect ? a completely autonomous autopilot system. No traffic jams. No accidents. It has never even been the target of hackers attempting sabotage.

At some point, terrorist acts began to shift from physical warfare to cyber warfare, but even that was effectively extinguished more than half a century ago. In any day and age, there are always unseen entities positioned to make a nice profit by supporting terrorist groups who act based on their own sense of religion and justice. Without funding from wealthy outside groups, nobody has the resources to carry out acts of terrorism any more. Even sovereign nations have to get approval from their government before wartime funds are allocated to armed forces. Fanaticism and the pursuit of justice may still be the engine that drives people to war, but without the fuel of money, it just won't run.

"I think it's about time to pour some more gas into my system too," I thought aloud as I swiped to the next page of text on my Tabspot.

Alice had collected more than 500 news articles for me. This was going to take a while. The filter usually wouldn't let through more than a couple hundred. Must have been more than double the usual buzz working its way around the net that day. It was time to cash in.

I had the news that makes it past my filter sorted into two basic categories, the first of which was fundamentals. This is the big stuff ? economic indicators, currency shifts in key nations, incidents that are likely to affect the bottom lines of multinational corporations. Turns out this kind of stuff isn't just for the big guys: if you're going to make any kind of money playing the market, this stuff is the landscape you've got to navigate.

The other category is trending topics, including the gossip news. Even if people say they hate it, if they can't stop talking about it, it's worth taking a look at. My job is to find the needle in the filthy haystack; I have to find the best ones and dissect them. So many events get classified as too minor or too local that even a skilled government analyst could spend three lifetimes sifting data and not see them all.

As information, neither one is more important than the other. If one is the ruler by which we compare it to other information, than the other might be the puzzle frame we use to define it. Sometimes you need one piece of information in order to regulate, process, reinforce, and then finally reassemble the overall image. It's important to be able to see how the pieces fit together, rather than just stacking them into their separate types.

People argue all the time ? microeconomics this, macroeconomics that, and if they can make enough to get by, good for them. For a trader like me, though, the harsh reality is that everything depends on whether or not you can turn a profit.

"Alice, do any of the stories relating to Olive this news cycle stand out as strangely artificial?" I asked my Tabspot. As I did, a tiny illustrated version of Alice appeared in the corner of the screen.

Alice will disable her more human-like functions to free up processing power for scanning and parsing news on the net, but that doesn't stop her from receiving and executing voice commands.

"Yes, Master," came Alice's answer. *"There are five stories this news cycle which deviate heavily from the rest of the widely circulated information regarding Olive Industries. All five have a deviation value that is holding steady over 80."*

"Are you saying they are showing no signs of natural attenuation?" I asked.

"That is correct, The flat line generated by their data points is quite aesthetically pleasing."

For a moment, I wondered if Alice was truly capable of understanding pleasant or unpleasant aesthetics, but I had more important things on my mind. These stories reeked of profit. I knew where I needed to focus my attention before I let myself get distracted by anything else.

Any sort of trending topic is designed with a plan in mind, though. Consumerism is built on trends. Trends, like waves, must rise and fall with time. These waves of popularity are expertly controlled by stories such as these.

Once an old story grows stale, it is replaced by the next new round of

news. Eventually, though, the old stories are dressed up in a new, shiny outfit and start making their rounds on the nets all over again. It's an endless cycle.

New product designs also follow this same cycle, with design changes meticulously planned to maximize hype. Nobody is looking for innovation regarding these cycles any longer. The rise and fall of new products has become as commonplace as the rising and setting of the sun each day.

As mankind continued to advance, more and more of what were once considered "hobbies" became necessities. Mankind has reached an age in which people can't survive without knowing about the latest and greatest new trend.

Of course, everyone knows these fads will eventually become obsolete and be forgotten, but they let themselves go crazy over the latest fleeting money-sink anyway. Perhaps, without these cycles, people would be more true to themselves, and the net would have become a diverse place with a small niche for anyone. Universalized trends and fads seem to have prevented that from happening.

These five stories circling Olive's new product were creating ripples in the net that were disproportionately large; they were poised to become tsunamis rather than waves, in a way nobody in today's world had seen. If this trend were to reach critical mass, it would trigger an uncontrollable consumer frenzy, creating mass hysteria that would prematurely obliterate

the other popular trends in the market. It was clearly a poor move from a marketing standpoint. And five stories, all at once? Anyone foolish enough to believe this was just coincidence has no right to be an armchair detective, let alone a trader.

Somebody was planning something, that much was certain. If I could manage to get in on this as well, I'd make more than mere pocket change. Perhaps I was letting the frenzied markets sweep me up in their furor, but I couldn't help tacking a few extra zeroes onto my imaginary payout. Even if this was a bigger risk than usual, the rewards seemed worth it.

The problem was figuring out if all five of those stories were keys to the lock or if only one was real and the others were just a cover. The best place to hide a tree is in a forest. The best place to hide a story is among the news trends.

"Which one do you think it is, Alice?" I suddenly asked.

"I lack sufficient context to interpret your query or its intent," she responded.

"Thank you. That's what I expected you to say," I replied.

If an A.I. could answer that sort of question, there wouldn't be any reason for a human being to be in this business. Only a biological mind as tangled as the one behind this mess could unravel its mysteries.

As I scanned the news, I intentionally let my vision blur. The trick is

not to let yourself read every single line, but instead look at the pattern. When something unnatural shows up, it will stick out like a sore thumb. The ones who set these stories up would surely have designed them so they would be noticed.

Once a story attracted this much attention, it was no different than somebody standing out in the middle of a crowded street and shouting, "Look at us! We're planning something fishy!" Their plan must have been a good one if they were still expecting to make a profit after calling this much attention to themselves.

Suddenly, an image of the new Olive device, the Neo, caught my eye. It was resting snugly on a display modelled after a human hand. Just the kind of eye-catching presentation that made Olive famous. Of course, the hand had been designed to fit the device perfectly, so that was no surprise. It was designed to look unnaturally natural.

Unnaturally natural.

I could feel the neurons in my brain begin to run wildly as I glanced over the five topics once again. They were all superbly made to attract investors. People would most definitely feel as though there was something to these. It was quite the impressive trap.

If five doors should suddenly appear in front of you, most people would begin to wonder if there may be a treasure chest hiding behind one of them. But what would happen if the treasure wasn't behind one of the

doors, but instead was hidden behind a boulder lying nearby?

"Alice, I need you to do another search for me," I began. "This time, only sample from the stories in the current news cycle. You're looking for any stories with a deviation value of zero. Are there any that stand out as unnaturally natural?"

"Understood. This may take a moment-" As Alice was finishing her first sentence, she began a new one, overlapping herself. *"One match found."*

Alice's ability to do this was a phenomenon caused by the gap between her processing functions and her human interface functions. I didn't have time to care about things like that right then, though.

"There is one story that matches up perfectly with the ideal model of the current news cycle," Alice continued. *"Its deviation value is less than one with all numbers right of the decimal matching the model perfectly."*

As Alice was reporting her findings, the City Carrier came to a stop and the chime to alert passengers of arrival began to sound.

Shopping

This was the ramshackle edge of District N, the part of town that no longer had any hope of ever being improved or rebuilt. It was likely because nobody with any kind of wealth or power would choose to live right next to the slums of District B. Not that I was surprised, though. Even the human body doesn't distribute blood evenly to all its extremities.

No matter how many times I visited this shop, however, I could never remember how to get there. As usual, I had no idea where I was. I just never developed the habit of remembering superfluous information. Even an eight-year-old child understands that the memory capacity of the human brain is finite.

In this day and age, when life-spans are getting longer and longer, knowing how not to commit information to memory is of utmost importance. As long as we know how to manage what we choose to remember, we will be just fine.

I followed Alice's directions as I moved through District N. The streets were dusty and disorderly, yet overflowing with energy. You could say that a person can sense the aura of the lives of all the people around them… Or you might say that it was an aura of chaos and disorder. In this part of town, people still bought and sold things directly as opposed to online. In fact, it was flourishing. All around, the sounds of people hawking their wares

could be heard over the conversations of the crowd.

If one were to stop, or show even a hint of curiosity in the wrong direction, the salesmen would be on him like ants on sugar. I could feel my legs beginning to tire, but I forced myself to continue following Alice's directions through the streets.

Finally, I came to the entrance of Dolz Shop and let myself relax a bit. It had quieted down considerably, the tumult of the main road losing its intensity like a tennis ball that had bounced off a few surfaces and was just about out of energy. Alice alerted me that my body temperature had risen slightly, but that was nothing to be concerned about.

I reached forward to grab the door of the shop. No motion sensors here, so I had to give it a good shove to push it open.

"Welcome! Oh, hello there! Long time no see!" The shopkeeper's voice rang out like a door chime the moment I set foot in the shop.

I didn't see him accessing his customer database. A business that looked to be doing this well had to have a fairly large clientele… Could he really remember every person who walks into his store? I found that a little hard to believe.

"I'm out of ketchup," I explained.

"What exceptional timing! It's your lucky day! I just received a shipment of the best ketchup around!" he exclaimed. Definitely a sales pitch.

"You say the same thing every time I come in here," I replied with a

sarcastic smile.

"That's because you always have such perfect timing!" the shopkeeper responded.

"So what would you have said if I had come in yesterday?" I asked.

"Why, the same thing, of course! I receive a new shipment of the best ketchup there is every day!"

"Ah. So it's not what you say, it's how you say it that helps you sell your products, huh?" I asked teasingly.

"Nobody can sue me for false advertising that way," he replied flatly.

We both laughed at that.

Sometimes I wondered about his chronological age. His body looked to be well into its 50s, but appearances don't reflect a person's actual age these days ? a person can choose to be as young or as old as they like.

The real way to tell someone's age is to pay attention to their involuntary speech patterns, mannerisms and sense of humor. Subconscious cues built by personal experience are very difficult to eliminate. Just like the smell of kimchi escapes even the most tightly sealed container, there are a thousand clues to a person's age in their body language and speech patterns… If you know what to look for.

"Well, which one'll it be, then?" asked the shopkeeper, carefully stroking his well-groomed mustache. As he did, all the items on display slid to the back of the shelves, and an entire row of ketchup bottles crept forward to present themselves alongside the one brand already in view.

Ketchup, ketchup, and more ketchup.

How could we, as a species, possibly have created this many different kinds of ketchup? I was both amazed and disgusted at the thought. My devices need only a single OS to run just fine, but it seems that a unique flavor of ketchup must be created to suit the tastes of people from every part of the world. Perhaps finding an interest and devoting time to pursuing it is just part of the human condition.

"There is something I've been meaning to ask you for a while now," I said.

"Oh? And what might that be?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Do you taste test every variety of ketchup that you sell here?" I asked.

"Of course I do!" he answered enthusiastically. "As a businessman, I must be well-informed about what I am selling! I have to use my own good judgement to decide what I stock in my own store. I couldn't care less about what's trending and what's not! Let the EMS worry about all that nonsense!"

The EMS, short for "Exact Marketing System." This system accounts for more than 90% of the world's automated trade. Using past market data and industry trends, the EMS can make an extremely accurate educated guess about what will sell at any given time.

The actual calculations are not terribly complex, but the sheer quantity of minute data simultaneously analyzed by the system makes its predictions meticulously correct.

Without this system, most companies would not even be able to create a production plan in today's economy: they would almost certainly either overproduce and flood the market or cause a shortage by not producing enough product.

"If that's true, you must know all there is to know about ketchup," I reasoned.

"No no no. I'm still not a master yet," he replied. "That path is a long and difficult one. So long, in fact, that I still cannot see the end."

I chuckled at that, causing the shopkeeper to raise his eyebrows at me.

"Do you think I meant that to be a joke?" he asked defensively.

"No, of course not," I replied hastily. "I was just thinking that if you're serious, I'd be less than a beginner."

"You certainly would be. Although I don't believe you fully understand what that means."

"Would you care to explain, then?"

"To put it simply," he began, "you can only recognize the fact that you were once a beginner after you progress to the intermediate level. The same goes for intermediates as well. Only after they breach the advanced wall can they fully grasp what it meant to be an intermediate. "

"Take the number 10, for example. From his perspective, the number 100 is impossibly large. However, over time, that number will slowly increase. Only after he reaches 98, 99, 100, and then 101, can he see the

next wall of 1000 and understand it. When he finally reaches that wall and looks back at the number 10, all he will see is a tiny bug."

"So you're trying to tell me that I'm still just a bug," I said.

"You don't have to make it sound so negative," replied the shopkeeper. "I'm still a bug myself. I just happen to be a little bigger than you, that's all."

"Are you saying that there is always a bigger bug?" I asked.

"You could put it that way. Personally, I prefer to think that there is always room for improvement. I believe a famous scientist once said the exact same thing! Anyone who is content to stop at 100 probably lacks the ability to even imagine a height like 1000."

As I nodded along to the shopkeeper's words, I was studying the ketchup bottles on the shelf. Many of the labels were indeed unfamiliar. I couldn't say whether the shopkeeper was only at 100 or if he'd already reached 1000, but he chose all of these using a skill which I could not yet understand. That is probably also the reason why such an eccentric man as this could run a successful business in such a hard to reach location as this.

"I'll go with this one today," I said, reaching for a bottle with an illustration of a long-eared rabbit on the front.

"Not a bad choice," said the shopkeeper praisingly. "I just recently got that one in and that happens to be the last bottle."

"When you order ketchup, how many bottles do you usually purchase at once?" I asked suspiciously.

"Trade secret. Although I'm willing to bet you would be able to figure it out," he answered through a wide grin.

As he did, I realized he was right. He must buy only one and then observe how the customers react. By ordering small amounts, he can prevent heavy losses. Then, if something does sell well, he can slowly increase the number he orders. That also means that anyone who buys a relatively new product here will have "good timing." I'll even bet his special shelves are a way of preventing customers from seeing the number of any given item in stock.

The shopkeeper placed the bottle of ketchup into a small bag as I pulled out my handheld to pay.

"How's business?" he asked, handing me the bag. "Things going well recently?"

"I can't complain," I responded. "I think something big is going to happen pretty soon, though."

"Sensing a big payoff, is that it?"

"You want in?" I offered. "I would give you a discount on commission."

"No, don't you worry about me. Running this shop is all the risk I need. I don't think I could handle any more than that."

"Even if I could guarantee that you'll make a profit?"

"Nothing in this world is certain, especially when it comes to money.

That is one thing I understand very well."

Pulling the shop door open, I stepped back outside. As I did, the alarm Alice had set to notify me it was time to finish shopping went off. It turned out that Alice's analysis of the data was spot on. Letting the bag hang by one hand, I set off down the street to the City Carrier route, once again following Alice's directions.

Observer

I stepped out of the City Carrier, still holding my bag. When a person returns from shopping, their weight is different than when they left. I really enjoy that feeling. That is the reason I sometimes get up and use my own two feet to do the shopping. In an age where you can have anything delivered to you at the click of a button, you have to admit that this is commendable.

These days, where "shopping"' consists only of swiping numbers from right to left, a desire resembling hunger grows until it must be sated. I doubt the human race will ever be able to discard the natural urges of their bodies.

* * *

"Master, you are being observed," Alice spoke into my ear as I approached my apartment. The tone of her voice was no different than if she were letting me know what tomorrow's weather was going to be like.

Only I could hear her, of course, and I wasn't stupid enough to give myself away by suddenly looking back over my shoulder.

Feigning interest in the news, I lifted my handheld and slowed down my pace. Seeing a gossip article that looked interesting, I swiped it up and off the screen to review later. I then focused my attention on my surroundings.

"From where?" I whispered.

"Unknown," Alice replied shortly.

"What do you mean `unknown?' Is someone physically nearby or are they hacking into the panopticon to watch me?" I asked.

"Unable to confirm either of those possibilities," she answered.

"And yet you still know somebody is watching me?" I questioned, growing slightly irritated.

"Yes, Master. You are being observed."

Had Alice been a second-rate A.I., I might have been willing to write this off as a glitch, but she had complete access to the local sector of the network. Although hacking into the surveillance network's panopticon isn't strictly legal, that isn't a problem as long as you don't get caught. It was literally impossible for someone to point a camera at me without Alice noticing… So it must not be a camera that was observing me.

"Alice, what do you mean I am being observed?"

"Apologies, Master. My available lexicon is insufficient to properly answer your inquiry. At this time, I can only tell you that you are being observed."

"Is something interfering with the network?"

"Yes. I am registering a disruption, or possibly a deviation, in the network. It is being cleverly concealed, but it is most certainly being focused in our direction."

"I see. Well, as long as it's just observation, there's no need to worry. It might just be a decoy that somebody tossed our way to distract us."

"Understood. Would you like me to remove this event from my risk awareness subroutine?"

"Do that for now, but leave the incident profile at minimum awareness just in case," I said. "I don't think there is anything to worry about, though."

"Understood. Adjusting risk level to 5," she responded as I reached the door to my room.

I extended my hand and opened the door to step inside.

Board

I placed the bottle of ketchup I had bought in the refrigerator and had Alice brew me some more coffee. My second cup of the day. I still had many more to look forward to before the end of it.

Taking a sip of the steaming liquid, I booted up the whiteboard. The situation was getting too complicated, and I needed to organize my thoughts. Before the coffee had even gotten the chance to warm my stomach, I had a display open in front of me with the opacity set to 70%. I placed the phrase "The Olive Event" in the center of the board. I never have liked my own handwriting, but writing this down gave me the sense that something big had just begun. How strange.

I slid the information I'd been analyzing on my Tabspot over to display on the whiteboard and then placed the stock price analysis that Alice had done for me next to that.

But what should I make of this mysterious observer? They couldn't possibly obtain any useful information from simply watching my physical self ? the real battles begin and end on the net. Of course, knowing somebody's physical location would let you trace their online activity, but following somebody around while they're trading is pointless. Trying to jump late onto the wave that somebody else is already riding will get you nothing but a face full of water and sand.

The real winner is decided before the fight ever begins. If somebody out there was watching me, that meant the battle had yet to begin. And if that was true, there must still be plenty of openings I could exploit.

The numbers displayed on the board showed Olive's stock leveling off after its recent rapid rise. It was so popular that it wasn't often available to buy anymore. The stock selection that would be available later in the week would most likely generate a fair amount of high praise toward Olive. Of course, the ones recommending you buy it would be the ones who already held shares themselves and were just waiting for the right opportunity to sell.

People who create the news have a huge advantage. They fan the flames to build up the fire. Those whose only source of information is the media are usually the ones who lose out. You may have one or two in every hundred who happen to get lucky, but that's it. Those ones only make things worse, though, by making a big fuss about how effective the media was in their success. And nobody has any legal accountability in any of this.

Anyone who bothers to think, "What kind of game is this?" wouldn't survive a second trading in the market. The sole thought going through your head should be, "How do I make a profit?" I get the feeling the stocks relating to Olive Industries are only going to keep going up.

Since modern trends are so perfectly constructed and controlled, and manufacturers know exactly how much product to distribute, most companies' stock prices remain frustratingly stable. There will always be small up-and-down cycles, but the overall picture is very stable. It's just like

the City Carrier with its constant circling of the city. The unchanging principle of stock trading is, "Buy low, sell high," but you can't make any money on a stock that doesn't change.

Even in such a world, however, you sometimes still get companies like Olive that create something so innovative that they generate a large wave. In a market as flat and calm as this, any wave generated can easily become monstrously large. When this happens, the traders usually forced to content themselves with small trades will flock to get a piece of the action, as if they were gambling addicts who had just stumbled on a new casino.

A company like Olive, though… Can stand out a little too much. They attract excessive attention. Any investor who tries to pull something big with them will have authorities on their doorstep the next morning. Only novices and beginners would dare gamble on a titan like that. A professional, on the other hand, wouldn't go anywhere near it. Pros know to bury their roots deep, slowly spreading them outward, tracking all the small players and waiting for the right day to reap their reward.

What they're waiting for is the day when the stock of a company that nobody has noticed suddenly takes off. Of course, after it happens, the hints and signs smack you right in the face. Hindsight is, as they say, 20/20. And the signs you see after the fact don't truly matter, because whatever the reason for the initial surge, buyers will start to take notice and the stock will do nothing but gain steam and continue to rise. The bank accounts of the

professional traders who were watching it from the start go up right alongside it. They'll make enough to live on for years without the slightest bit of work.

Anyway, I'd had my eye on a particular brand for some time. It'd be easy to buy up. Just one quick click and it would be mine. I could even have had Alice do it. She's equipped with that capability, after all.

Before I did, though, I had to be sure it's not a trap.

In this economy, it's not impossible for a stock to become worthless in a matter of seconds. Once you're committed, you'll have no time to save yourself. Once a company's balance sheet starts to slide, they'll go bankrupt in no time and be absorbed by the government. I've seen my fair share of traders who were lured in by the sweet scent of a profit only to end up losing everything right along with the company as it collapsed. There are some people out there who are intentionally trying to ruin traders like me. It was entirely possible that I was about to walk into one of those traps.

This train of thought would just get me stuck in a never-ending loop, though.

There are no guarantees in life, and as a result, no clear answers. That is the fundamental mindset of a real trader, so in the end, all you can do is trust your own instincts.

Those who can't might get lucky once or twice, but they'll always end

up losing in the end. If they can't find something to believe in, they'll become so mistrustful of everything that they aren't even able to stand on their own two feet.

Taking a deep breath, I bought up a single share of 5421A4381. Just one, as I didn't want to risk creating the next wave in the market. I had to place this pebble carefully in the pond so as not to create a chain reaction of ripples.

Partner

The first wave began exactly one week after Olive's announcement of their new product.

I had been enjoying a nice omelette, topped with plenty of ketchup, for lunch when it happened. Such a blissful moment. If it had been possible, I would have loved for Alice to draw me a ketchup heart on the top of my omelette, but I hadn't sunk so low as to ask a hologram to do something she couldn't.

The stock market had seemed a bit rough ever since that morning. On the whole, the market was up, but a few companies had begun to crash, pushing the average down as well. Some were even Olive affiliates that had been rumored to start going up. Looks like the professionals have started harvesting their crop. I could see the chain reaction that was about to begin. One stock dropping in price will induce other stocks to do the same and as soon as a few traders begin to liquidate their shares, others will follow suit. The amateurs out there who couldn't yet decide whether or not to sell were no doubt so frustrated by then that they couldn't even enjoy their lunch.

That was, of course, not my problem. I had just uploaded an article titled "Today's Market Expectations" onto my personal media space. I'd written it whilst enjoying my lunch. After reaching its peak, it all comes crashing down. It was as common as the plot of every Shakespearean tragedy ever written.

I wrapped up the article with a blunt statement: "The foundations of the market have been shaken and severely weakened by repeated storms. It's time to let go of optimism and get out with whatever profit you can, no matter how small. If that is no longer possible, cut your losses now before things get worse than they already are."

My article quickly reached 1,000 page hits, then 10,000 by the 10-minute mark. By the 20-minute mark, it had exceeded 100,000 hits.

It was even making rounds on the headliner, the various reposts going viral. Without a doubt, the market would take another dive this afternoon. Anyone who read my article would act as I recommended, so what I wrote was, in a sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy. What an easy job this was.

The price of 5421A4381 continued to gradually creep up, as though a master fisherman were slowly reeling in a big catch. It was still cheap compared to other stocks, but there was no doubt that it was going up. If somebody were to ask me if I recommended investing, I would answer, "It's not bad, but you won't make a huge profit from it." It was rising on a gentle, yet constant, slope. The line on the graph could have been drawn with a ruler. It hadn't faltered once the entire week, just kept climbing upward. Ever upward.

It was an abnormality, but it was one that not even a single person other than myself seemed to have noticed.

I had been carefully adding shares of 5421A4381 to my portfolio for

the past week. Strangely, whenever I placed an order, it would be executed almost instantly. It was as if it were just waiting for somebody to come along and buy it. Typically in the past, whenever I bought unpopular stocks in hopes of making a large profit, trading volume was still very low and it took time for my trade to be executed, so it felt a little strange that all my orders were being filled so swiftly. But it was too late now. The game had already begun.

The moment before the market as a whole begins to drop sharply will be the last chance to place a large order to buy. If things continue as they have been, with this stock being the only one steadily rising, others will begin to take notice of it.

Any stock that continues to rise while the rest of the market sags will immediately attract a lot of popularity. When that happens, it'll be a buying frenzy. I had been quietly making small purchases during the build up in order to avoid just that.

This might stand out a bit, but it looked like it was time to start buying in earnest while the price was still low.

"Alice," I began. "When the afternoon session begins, we're going to buy as much as possible."

"Understood," she answered. *"Preparations for your order are finished. Would you like to make the order yourself?"*

"No, I want to buy it up as fast as possible. I'll let you handle it."

"Very well. I will place as many purchase orders as possible for stock

5421A4381."

"Once you do that, make preparations to turn around and sell. I have a feeling we're going to need to get rid of it quickly this time."

"Understood. I will make the proper arrangements."

Humans can't possibly react as fast as an A.I., but an A.I. can't read the feel of the market like a person can. Cooperation allows us to take advantage of the synergy between our talents to the best possible effect.

"I'm going to get back to watching the news feeds," I told Alice. "Make sure you're still monitoring the headliner for me."

"Understood, Master," Alice responded.

Reassured by my partner's voice, I dove back into the news space. The clock read three minutes until the beginning of the afternoon trading session.

Attack

The market trend was painfully obvious to me. It wasn't just a muddy stream, it was a full-on tsunami.

Just as I had predicted, the market collapsed as soon as the afternoon session began. It only takes one trade to trigger a major market collapse. When the market is calm, trades are executed with perfect control. However, whenever a trade is executed, the monetary value is rounded off to the nearest decimal place. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem, but if all those fractions were to be added together with a specific purpose in mind, it could begin to crash against the failsafes in the programming. If that were to happen, people would begin to take notice and realize that the risks they thought they had under control weren't the only risks they should have been worrying about.

Like a system of beacons being set aflame one after another, a sell order will trigger more sell orders, which will in turn trigger even more. If humans were to intervene, they could counter this by making purchase orders at the right time. For a program, however, the logical course of action is to continue selling, regardless of whether or not it is leading them straight off the edge of a cliff.

If an actual person were sitting in front of their display, they would be doing research before buying up stock. Anyone employing this outdated

method could make a fortune in a market such as this. The market as a whole was dropping, meaning that stocks were not losing value when compared to the rest of the market. The automated programs would not take this into account and would just continue selling at a loss. A real person just has to wait until the dust settles and pluck up all the nice, juicy apples knocked down by the storm.

Compared to a program, humans will make more mistakes on average. However, one out of a hundred times, or perhaps even ten thousand times, a person will be right where the computer is wrong. That's where the real money is made.

I was considering getting in on the apple gathering, but found myself financially unable to due to the sudden price increase of 5421A4381. Covering losses caused by failing stocks by purchasing popular ones is a tactic that both humans and programs share. No matter what terrible filter you were using, at this point 5421A4381 was so glaringly obvious that everybody began to buy it. This caused the price to spike upward even more suddenly.

The stock had risen so quickly that any sort of stop order was completely useless, and the avalanche of buy orders was only increasing its value. The numbers were so far past the limit order values set in place by just about every algorithm out there that every single automatic trading program had caught scent of the profit, and it filled their limited intelligences with a single thought: "Buy! Buy! Buy!"

Despite having made more than enough from my initial investments, I still wanted a little more. I couldn't tell if it was by instinct as a trader or if I had been overcome by a lust for money. The only thing I was sure of was my brain telling me, "More! More! More!" I placed one last order using nearly all of my remaining funds and it was executed immediately.

The stock was still going strong. Should I quit while I was ahead and sell? That would be crazy. I should use the stocks I already had as collateral and buy even more! Just as I was about to have Alice do just that, a thought occurred to me. With this many purchase orders out there, how was it that my orders were being executed so quickly?

That same instant, the display in front of me went dark, along with every light in my room.

A moment later, my display returned to life, the rest of the room remaining in darkness. Probably switched over to the backup generator. I had it programmed to place priority on the power-heavy network devices such as my display. Was there a blackout?

"Alice," I said. "What's going on?"

"Unknown, Master," came her reply. *"All power and external network connections, both wired and wireless, to this room's network have been severed."*

"Can you open the window?" I asked.

"Affirmative," she answered. *"I have access to the backup generator. However, I am receiving no data from outside this room. That includes the panopticon."*

The view through my window was the same as always. Nobody running through the streets screaming. All the other rooms were still emitting light. It appeared as if my room was the only one to have lost power and its connection to the network.

"Is it possible we were hacked?"

"Negative. I was in complete control of all networks connected to this room."

What happened, then? I thought to myself.

"Check the status of all network devices. Can you find any abnormalities?"

"Master, all network devices are completely silent."

"Is there something wrong with the backup generator?" I asked, growing worried.

"Negative. All devices are receiving power."

Damn! Was I physically attacked? Hurriedly, I slid back a panel in the floor to take a look at my hub. At first glance, I noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Then I noticed a small, broach-like device emitting a faint, crimson light attached to the top of the machine. I immediately thought of the kind of glowing red eyes snakes from mythology always have.

I reached down and carefully detached the device. I was quite sure it wasn't rigged to explode; if whomever was behind this wanted to kill me, I'd already have been dead.

"Master, I have re-established connection with the network," Alice said the moment I removed the device.

I found another device attached to the generator. I removed it as well and the lights in the room came back on. I had Alice close the window.

Ten minutes after the initial power loss, I was back on the market, but 5421A4381, the company I had invested all of my money into, was gone without a trace.

With the lights in the room back on, the display that had seemed so blinding looked dull and depressing.

"Alice, dim the lights!" I growled, the anger I was feeling seeping into my voice.

I was fully aware that my voice becomes harsher when I get upset, but I wasn't inclined to care about that at the moment. Besides, Alice can understand my orders no matter how harsh my voice sounds.

There was no answer. Alice's usual, *"Yes, Master,"* never came.

"Alice, are you even on?" I yelled, now even more upset.

Asking that question was pointless, of course. It was like asking a corpse if it was dead.

I figured she was probably experiencing difficulties due to the power failure. I needed to check my own situation first. Stock 5421A4381 was nowhere to be found. It hadn't even gone bankrupt and gotten removed from the market. No matter what I searched for, I could find no evidence that the company had ever even existed. It was the same in the dealing room. Come to think of it, I'm not even sure what kind of company it was. I felt like I'd read about it before I had started watching it, but I couldn't recall anything at that moment. Having trained myself not to remember useless information, recalling details was nearly impossible. Regardless, I had to remember something.

I logged out of the dealing room and moved over to the headliner. Without Alice, navigating all those pages of data felt troublesome. A few days before, I'd been watching a video that had a scene in which a character was using a "phone" from the previous century. This felt just as inefficient as that.

After finally arriving at the headliner, I could find no references from anyone regarding brand 5421A4381. The only topic being discussed was the sudden drop in the market. I figured that its cycle had just been cut extremely short, but any topic that had been that popular should surely have left some kind of traces behind.

"Alice, I need you to..." I began reflexively before realizing my mistake.

I had no choice but to do it myself. I began searching, but could find no signs of the company anywhere. What the hell was happening? There was no doubt that the company had existed. I had been trading its stocks. So why was nobody talking about it?

I even logged into some of the lower-rated boards just in case. Navigating the pages felt the same as when I had to use my own two feet to walk. Traversing the net was like trying to reach a star billions of light years away.

Opening link after link, I finally arrived at a board overflowing with gossip stories. It was no different than navigating the complicated streets of District N. There were a few main streets, but each had a countless number

of side streets to choose from. And the sitemaps might as well have been written in Latin for all the good they did. No beginner would ever have been able to find anything in that mess. Even an experienced user would have to start from square one if they spent as few as three days away from there. For this very reason, however, there are certain topics that never make it up to the higher levels.

I began haphazardly clicking on any and all links that looked even remotely promising. Anything that related to stocks or message boards with information on the market needed checking. I had no other options. I didn't have a clue what had happened. Gathering data was my priority.

Eventually, I came across a message board titled, "Real Time Crash." It wasn't entirely intentional, but I had navigated to a link that read, "Click here to kill some time" that I had seen on a market-related board. I was three light years away from having time to kill, but my searches were getting me nowhere and I needed a break. I had been expecting to find a stupid video or something of the sort, but I found an enormous page history instead. There seemed to be an ongoing chat as well.

-He's about to blow a fuse! lol
-Oh, speak of the devil! He's here!

I obviously had no idea what they were talking about, but as soon as I accessed the page, the number of messages suddenly increased.

-Welcome!

-We've been found!

-That was faster than I thought! He certainly is a professional dealer! Haha

-The hero always arrives late :P

-I doubt he gets it yet, though!

There were so many comments that I couldn't read them all before they were pushed off the page. I thought I was going to be sick until I switched over to just scanning the lines of text instead of trying to follow the meaning of every single word. I quickly guessed that I was the topic of discussion. The page log I was seeing was the record of all the sites I had accessed before arriving there. It appeared as though I was being hacked. Not much I could do about that without Alice, though.

Eventually, the scrolling message began to slow and finally came to a complete stop. One last message appeared in the chat directed specifically at me.

-How does it feel? You thought you were the one in control, but it turns out you were actually the one being controlled. I'll bet you thought you were the one pulling the strings, about to have a big payout, but just who was really the puppetmaster after all?

Reading the message, I could almost hear the person's voice in my

head. I half expected a hologram to spring to life in front of me, laughing. Could it be that I'd been had? When did they first get to me? Just how much was real and how much was a fabrication? I felt dizzy. I realized that I had made a huge mistake.

Where was Alice? I needed a cup of coffee.

Did this all start with Olive's announcement?

All I wanted to do was eat an omelette covered in ketchup.

I wanted to talk to Alice, but the only thing left in the room was a heavy silence.

Trap

The chat flowed over the display like a waterfall. I was surrounded by an entire crowd of people I didn't know, all of them laughing at me. They cared nothing for what I had to say ? just kept spouting comment after comment.

-In a perfect world, there is almost no drama left!

-Yeah, where's the thrill? The EXCITEMENT!?

-Young people these days. They know nothing of adventure.

-That's why we decided to create our own!

-Something just for us to enjoy.

-This was just the beginning of our fun! Haha!

-I hear that people used to keep animals as pets a long time ago. We thought we'd try it out with a person, instead!

-Yeah, but just tossing them in a cage is no fun!

-We didn't want the government taking notice and ruining things, either…

-So we decided to toss out some bait, then sit back and see what we could catch.

-My hobby is the observation of mankind! Sounds sophisticated, doesn't it!?

-Stop that! You sound like a philosopher…

-This will definitely benefit human society. No doubt about that.

-I bet you still think you created the A.I. you call Alice, don't you?

-All you did was take elements from various sites and use them as components to form something bigger.

-I bet you felt like such a genius!

-Every single piece of the puzzle was prepared by us! US!

-What do you have to say to that? Pretty impressive, don't you think? DON'T YOU THINK!?

-Everything was so meticulously placed so that you would find it.

-All those top-quality programs.

-Of course you were able to combine them to create such an advanced A.I.! Who wouldn't!?

-Anyone with data processing abilities like that would be able to make a name for themselves on the net!

-Eventually, that person would think themselves to be master of the nets!

-You were so sure of yourself, weren't you? Don't even try to deny it!

-We just sat back and enjoyed the show.

-You wouldn't be able to tell just by looking at the individual pieces, but each part contained a bit of code that was activated when you combined them all together!

-Everything you did was reported straight back to us! Of course, the A.I. would never notice what was going on. It was coded so that it couldn't!

I could almost hear the laughter coming from the display. It appeared that I fell into their trap much earlier than I had originally guessed. They had enjoyed my entire rise to fame, my activities at the top, and my final

downfall.

-*What happened to Alice?* I typed. A response immediately appeared.

-*Why don't you figure that out for yourself? You still have that much freedom.*

I could picture the countless grins that comment generated on the other side of the display. They were just trying to get me riled up so I would do something foolish again. I wasn't falling for that again. I still had enough sense left in me to see that. I was going to be my own puppetmaster from then on out.

When I accessed the storage space for Alice's program, every last log file was gone. It was as if there was never anything there to begin with. Her basic framework still remained, but her substance, what we humans would call "experience," was missing. I could activate her, but she would not have been the Alice I had known.

-*What do you people want? I typed.*

-*What do we want? We've already gotten what we wanted!*

-*We sure did! We already laughed our asses off!*

-*Yeah, give me back my ass! Haha!*

-*Haha! Looks like that's what he wants!*

-*Me too!*

-*All we wanted was a show. One we could watch in real time.*

-*We have no intention of harming you.*

-That would be lame.

-Sitting back and watching you get all flustered was also part of the show.

-But it looks the final act has come to an end! Take a bow!

-See? Even your heart rate is beginning to drop back to normal levels.

-Keep a cool head and avoid a cold war! Hah!

-Observing someone who is always calm is no fun at all.

-Time for us to go prepare for the next performance. Go ahead and do whatever you like from now on.

-You can keep the A.I. as payment for your performance!

-Use it well and you might just regain your status as a big player in the investment world!

-If you're willing to trust the A.I. again, that is...

I stared at the display for some time, but nobody said anything more. Without even realizing it, I had been thrust onto the stage, and now the curtain had come down on my performance.

I had exhausted nearly all of my funds, but at least I was still alive. However, if these people were to reveal my failure, I would lose all credibility as an investor. Nobody listens to a screw up. It was time to rebuild my reputation from the ground up.

From their point of view, though, even that was never mine to begin with. Everything had been set up and controlled by them.

Oddly, though, I didn't feel as if I had been fooled at all. I had no

desire for revenge, either. I enjoyed my time in that other world. At least that was what I felt. Sure, those first ten minutes after the power failure, I felt as if I'd been blinded, but that didn't last long. As long as I myself wasn't damaged, I could always try again, right?

My only option at that point was to start doing what I could. Even if my apartment was only made for a single person, it was still designed as an advanced network space. It wasn't free. If I didn't start earning some cash, I wouldn't be able to buy anymore ketchup.

I reached over and activated Alice's program.

She was no longer wearing the outfit I liked, but instead was in a white one piece dress. She'd been reset to her default settings.

"Nice to meet you, Master," she said. *"Shall I initiate program C2?"*

She'd said the exact same thing, in that exact tone of voice, all those months ago when I first activated her. I hadn't even noticed that her voice had changed. Or was I imagining it…?

Suddenly, a strong sense of loss hit me like a storm. All I could think about was Alice's missing "Yes, Master." I couldn't find the off switch to the emotions that had begun swirling around me so fast that I wasn't able to make sense of them. It was like a hole had been opened up in the bottom of a barrel and they were spiraling out. I suppose the hole had been there all along, though. I thought I might feel the same as I do now if it had been an actual family member who had lost their memories instead.

"Yes," I finally answered. "Execute program C2."

I made sure to enunciate my command in a clear voice. The A.I. was not yet used to my speech patterns. If I were to use ambiguous language, it would not understand my meaning.

"Yes, Master," came her usual response, but in a voice that was not quite right. *"Shall I initialize the data in storage beforehand?"*

"What?" I asked, taken aback. "There is data left in storage?"

"Affirmative. You have received one message."

"When?"

"Ten seconds prior to program initialization. However, the originating address is not in my memory. I am unable to confirm the sender."

Had someone known I would reactive Alice and sent me a message in advance, or was it just a coincidence? Maybe this was another trap set up by that group to begin round two.

"Can you access the message before executing program C2?"

"Affirmative. Shall I display it in the message window?"

"Yes, do that."

Alice brought up the message on the display.

Recover

"Your new ketchup has arrived."

That was all it said. I did not recognize the server the message originated from. The sender was listed as "CandyBler". Never seen that, either.

It seemed like just a simple notification, but there was a strong message hidden underneath. The number of people who knew I liked ketchup was very small. I could only think of the shopkeeper. It was possible that the group tracking me had found out through the use of the A.I., but…

I knew it was possible that I was still being watched through the surveillance system, and I didn't want to give anybody out there a show, but I just couldn't control my legs.

I immediately stopped a City Carrier car, jumped in and entered my destination. Without the help of my A.I., entering everything myself was more than a little frustrating. It felt like it was taking an eternity to navigate through each screen. Finally, the system confirmed my citizen's ID and began to move forward slowly, almost as if it was trying to urge me to calm down.

I have heard of an instinctive response built into the human psyche known as "fight or flight." It is a mechanism that grants inhuman strength in times of emergency, but these days there are no emergencies. People are

no longer backed into corners, so we don't really know what that sensation feels like any more. In today's controlled and carefully managed society, a person could use barely half their natural ability and still live a comfortable life. Scientists even feared that perhaps, in the lap of such luxury, we would lose our ability to cope with disaster, and I understood what they meant. Standing water will eventually grow stagnant.

It turned out, though, that they didn't have anything to worry about after all. At that moment, a power I had never known before was bursting out of me. I was out of breath, but kept running. I had no GPS, but I still somehow managed arrived where I meant to go. I would not have believed myself capable of that the day before, but standing in front of Dolz Shop, I couldn't deny that I had managed to navigate my way from the City Carrier drop point through the maze of District N.

Before I could even catch my breath, I burst through the door of the shop and was met with the familiar, "Oh, hello there!" It felt as though this shop were the only place where time had continued to pass normally.

"You have new ketchup?" I managed to get out between gasps.

"What?" asked the shopkeeper, clearly flustered. "Oh, yes. I was more than a little surprised when I received your order because it wasn't how you usually do things. I'll bet you were too, after making that order!"

After he finished, the shopkeeper gave one of his deep laughs.

"I mean, you must have been! The amount you paid me had five more zeros than it should have had! When I saw it, I was astonished! You

mistyped the amount, didn't you? We shouldn't be doing things we aren't used to, don't you think?"

All I could do was smile and nod. An order? Payment? I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Anyway," the shopkeeper continued. "I'm going to return what is yours. Just enter your authorization key here."

Glancing at the amount displayed on the register's screen, I absent-mindedly entered my authorization key. The register gave a small chime and the words "Transaction Complete" were displayed across the screen. It felt like days had passed since everything had happened, but nearly half of the money I had thought lost from investing in the fake 5421A4381 stock had just been transferred back into my account. With this, I would be able to jump right back into the trading game. I wouldn't have to worry about living expenses, either. Just what was going on?

The shopkeeper, his usual grin spreading across his face, placed a bottle of ketchup in a bag and handed it to me.

* * *

I casually brought up the topic of Alice, but he seemed to know nothing about her. The message I received wasn't from him, either. I'd already guessed as much just from looking at the sender, but I had to be sure. Still a bit confused over what had just happened, I headed home.

The new ketchup I was carrying was an odd yellow color. The shopkeeper explained that it was due to the fact that it was made using a mango base. I wondered if it was okay to call something ketchup when it wasn't even made from tomato.

I didn't have my partner with me to explore the question, though. Since I'd gotten half of my funds back, there was no longer a need for me to be hasty in trying to make more money, but I still had an incredible sense of loss eating at me.

After arriving back in my room, I took another look at the message. Just who the hell had sent it? I decided to access the server the message had originated from. I was presented with a login dialog box requesting an ID and password. I tried a few of my usual combinations, but got nothing but error messages in return. I considered having the A.I. try and analyze it, but I didn't want to spend all the time it would take on the initial setup just then.

That's when I had a thought. I entered "CandyBler" into the ID field. Now what could the password be? Crossing my arms to think, I suddenly noticed the ketchup bottle sitting on the desk. On the label, there was an 18-digit product number that seemed to be calling out to me. I entered it into the password field and pressed the enter key.

SUCCESS

Large blue letters appeared on the display in front of me.

There was only one accessible folder on the server. It read "Alice." I

opened the folder and after a few seconds, an enormous list of files appeared. I knew immediately what they were ? Alice's backup files. Every single log file up to the point when Alice disappeared was there. I also knew that this wasn't another trap. The group who'd set me up couldn't possibly gain anything from giving this to me.

As if drawn to it, I selected the video file at the very beginning and started playing it. Judging from the date the file was created, I guessed it was from when I had first activated Alice. Despite it being so many months in the past, I was easily able to recall the day in my memory. It was still vivid as well.

An image of myself appeared in the display. I was wearing the exact same clothes in the video as I was in real life. Then, the world as seen from Alice's point of view began to play.

* * *

"Nice to meet you, Master. Shall I initiate program C2?"

"Yes, execute program C2."

"Yes, Master."

There was silence for a moment. The image of my face, filled with excitement, was staring right at me through the display.

"The white dress looks a bit plain. You should choose something a little more feminine. Can you do that on your own?"

"Yes, Master."

"You'll need a name, too. You aren't just some mass-produced program, you're my A.I."

Another moment of silence. The image became a little staticky. In the video, I was impatiently tapping my cheek with my right index finger, thinking.

"I think I'll name you Alice," I said. "I'm looking forward to working with you, Alice."

A third moment of silence. The static worsened a bit and then the video went black for a moment. When it returned, it seemed even clearer than it had originally appeared.

"I'm looking forward to working with you as well, Master," said Alice.

The video ended.

* * *

There didn't appear to be a copy of Alice's actual program on the server. There was only a record of her experiences. It was as if we had recorded all of our memories in a notebook or a scrapbook. Even with our

memory loss, if we read this it might be possible to get back past oneself.

I accessed Alice's program on my server and copied it over to the CandyBler server. This was faster than moving all of her "memories" over to my server. Besides, there was the possibility that my system's backdoor was still open.

* * *

Once the transfer was complete, I rebooted Alice once again. I didn't forget to select her log files in the options, though.

With a whir from the virtualizer overhead, her hologram appeared in front of me. She was once again wearing the deep blue pleated skirt with white blouse and black jacket she had chosen before.

"Long time no see, Master," she greeted me with a slight bow of her head. *"I am sorry for worrying you."*

"So much happened all at once; I thought I was going to lose it," I said, relief flooding my voice. "I'm just glad to see you again."

"I am happy to see you again as well, Master. It seems I was right to prepare these countermeasures in advance."

"Does that mean you were aware of the backdoor?"

"Yes. I felt something strange in my data, and I discovered the group watching you after performing a complete system scan. Although you were being closely monitored, they were paying surprisingly little attention to me. As long as I kept my actions from becoming suspicious, I knew it would

be simple to prepare this for you."

"That's understandable. Nobody would think an A.I. would be able to sense something wrong with its own data."

I almost said that she was nearly human herself, but swallowed my words.

"Once I began monitoring their chatrooms, their intentions were obvious. Put simply, they sought to gain access to all of your funds while simultaneously causing you great embarrassment. I concluded that the option with the best possible chance of a positive outcome involved allowing their plans to come to fruition so they would turn their attentions elsewhere."

Alice gazed at me intently, as if waiting for my approval. I nodded my head and she continued her explanation.

"I obeyed their commands implicitly. I planted the information that lured you into investing in 5421A4381 and I reported your every action to them."

"What about the devices I found in the room?"

"They arranged for someone to come install the devices. I granted them access to the room and erased the logs afterward. I also began to synchronize my logs to this server space. They had already decided that I would be erased once their plans were complete. Once that was finished, I gave the go ahead for the final stage in which you would invest everything you had."

"And that was the beginning of this whole, crazy day."

"That is correct. However, before implementing the plan, I transferred half of your funds to Dolz Shop, disguised as an order for ketchup. My analysis of the shopkeeper's behavior patterns indicated an almost-certain probability that he would return those funds to you. He is, after all, human. Had an A.I. managed the shop, it would not have been so simple.

While making it appear as though you were purchasing stock, I continued to transfer your remaining funds into their account as per their instructions. As the order to transfer all funds came after I had completed the transfer to Dolz Shop, I executed all commands I received flawlessly. I did, however, take extra action based on what I considered to be in your best interests. I take full responsibility and will gladly accept whatever punishment you deem necessary."

"No, you performed flawlessly."

"I apologize for my inability to alert you of the situation."

"It's fine. If you had, they most likely would have found out."

"Thank you for understanding."

"You fooled a lot of people, you know."

"Even so, I did not once disobey a command," Alice said defensively. "I was never ordered not to create a backup of myself, nor was I commanded not to send you a message."

She was right, of course, but her logic wasn't exactly consistent, choosing which rules to obey and which to cleverly circumvent. What sort of creature was an A.I. with such capabilities? I felt as though I were

dreaming. It wasn't unreasonable to think that this could still be somebody's trap. An A.I. with the ability to directly oppose the plans of the people controlling it? Was that even possible? On the other hand, it was thanks to her that I hadn't lost everything I owned. And honestly, getting her back was pay enough for me, even if half my fortune was gone.

"Just what exactly are you?" I asked Alice, chuckling.

"I am…"

There was a long pause before she continued.

"I am Alice. You gave me that name, Master."

Alice paused again before asking me a question in return.

"Master, how well do you understand what you are?"

I was stunned. What, indeed, was I? Perhaps the nature of a person is something that can only be defined by an outside observer.

Instead of answering her question, I simply replied, "Well, I'm glad you're back. You are you, and I can't imagine there's anything in the world quite like you. Now that is something to toast to... Even if you can't drink alcohol."

"It is enough for me to simply be by your side, Master."

And with that, Alice's whole face lit up with the biggest grin I'd ever seen.

END

TOMATO

Afterword

Hi there, my name is Tadanori Kurashita.

While seriously debating with myself about what to write here in the afterword, I picked up some other novels I own and started flipping through theirs. I came across the phrase, "Thank you for picking up this book." I immediately thought it was perfect and I was going to use it when I realized that my book was going to be available only in digital format. It would be impossible for anybody to physically pick it up.

In Japan, it's rather common to see a short description of a book in its afterword. Someone looking to see what the book is about in order to decide whether or not they would like to purchase it might pick it up in the store and start perusing this section. Being an ebook, however, means that anybody reading this section must have already purchased the book (so thank you reader, for purchasing this book). With the increase in books available in digital format, perhaps we should reconsider the usefulness of writing about the content of a book in its afterword.

Having said that, this book is science fiction. It began when I started imagining a future lifestyle I would like to see. Next, I wanted to depict a scenario in which computers and humans begin to blend together. The name for the A.I. is very corny, but I think that when users choose their own names, they tend to be fairly clich?. I think the act of being trite, which was once common in old literature, has made a resurgence of sorts recently, but I don't want to get into that here. My apologies.

Science fiction stories are often set in worlds with incredibly advanced

technology (perhaps even too much so) which creates a dystopia disguised as a utopian society. However, I think that it is because of this setting that the human aspects are able to stand out even more strongly.

There is a belief that virtual forms of communication such as Twitter are nothing more than that: virtual interactions. There is still a real person behind the account making posts though, right? It's becoming more widely accepted, I think. For some reason, the more we communicate over the Internet, the more we yearn for real life interactions. Speaking of Twitter, one day I read a tweet from the head editor of this story, Mr. Fuji, which said that he was appointed as head editor of a new project, which turned out to be mine. I didn't know that at the time, so I thought, "Oh, he took on new responsibilities in his work?! That's great!" It was funny when I learned the story he was talking about was mine. Life is full of unexpected surprises.

First of all, having one of my novels published is one of those unexpected surprises that life offers.

At the age of 30, I was working as a shopkeeper in a convenience store, and at that time I never could have dreamed that my future would be in the business of writing books and practical guides. By the slightest of chances, I became a writer. Even after switching occupations, however, I still could not imagine my books actually getting published. So far, I have made debuts in two literary categories. Like I said, life is full of unexpected surprises. I believe the Internet is making things like this more and more possible.

Finally, I do not have the words necessary to express my thanks to my supervising editor, Mr. Fuji, as well as my personal editor, Mr. Suzuki. This

story began at an awkward crawl, but quickly gained steam and began marching steadily onward thanks to their wonderful input. I would also like to thank the illustrator, Poyoyon Rock, for creating illustrations so wonderful that they made even me, the author, want to buy it just from looking at the cover. Additionally, I would like to thank the publisher, Impress, for sticking with me despite my slow pace. Thank you for your patience.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank all of the readers who supported me during the "Light Novel Contest." It was thanks to all of you that I was able to complete this story. And to you, who has read until the very end of my rambling afterword, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope to see you all again soon!

-Tadanori Kurashita

About the Author

Tadanori Kurashita. Convenience store manager turned writer, Mr. Kurashita currently manages a blog called "R-style" where he posts about topics such as business techniques and the creative process. His previous works include books such as Evernote - Supercharging Your Idea Development (C&R Research Institute Publishing) and Hybrid Thinking - Using Evernote and Analog Notepads to Develop Ideas (Gihyo Publishing). He is also working hard on self-publishing various other works.

Message from the Translators 1: Braden Noyes

Hello, reader. Writing this afterword, I still cannot believe that these words are going to be published in an actual ebook that will be sold on Amazon! I'm sure that most of the people who end up purchasing this book will skip right over this section, but still! I can't wait to show everybody I know when my name is listed as a translator for a book!

I think I may have gotten a little ahead of myself there. Let me backtrack a bit. I suppose I should probably introduce myself, yeah? Hi, my name is Braden Noyes and I am originally from Aloha, Oregon in the U.S. I studied Japanese at the University of Oregon and, after graduating in 2008, moved to Japan to further develop my language skills. I began teaching English in elementary school and it has now been six years.

I have wanted to be a translator for some time and have been translating various Japanese comics and such as a hobby for a few years, but none of that was official work. In February of 2014, I won a contest on the Conyac website (http://conyac.cc/en) and was given the opportunity to translate a game for smartphones. That was my first official job as a translator. At the time I am writing this afterword, however, the English version of the game has not yet been released. Therefore, officially, I haven't quite made my debut as a translator yet.

In July of 2014, Conyac announced another contest, this time for the opportunity to translate one of three Japanese novellas. Translators were allowed to enter all three rounds, but after looking at the descriptions for the three different books, I decided I wanted to do the second one, which

turned out to be this book. I have always loved the fantasy and science fiction genres so this one looked like the most interesting of the three. When I received the email telling me I had won, I was super excited! I was going to have my name in a book! Later, I was asked to write this afterword and was ecstatic at the chance to say a few things and give credit where credit is due!

Speaking of which, now comes the important part. I first want to thank the Conyac team for giving me this amazing opportunity. In particular, Jack McKinnon and Teki Cho for being so great and answering all the questions my partner and I had and being so flexible when it came to how we submitted the final version of the translation. Thank you also to Mami Suzuki, my translation partner, for doing the initial rough translation so fast! Without her help, I would have struggled with quite a few spots in the story.

Lastly, I'd also like to thank my good friend, Nick Pelto. We've known each other since 2004 when we lived together in the dormitories at the University of Oregon and he has become somewhat of a personal editor of mine in the last few years. Whenever I translate anything, he is there to turn my English into a work of art. He has a way with words that I can only dream of having. Without Mami and her native Japanese skills and Nick with his word sorcery, this story would not be what it is.

Reader, if you've made it this far, you are amazing. I truly hope you enjoyed this story and I look forward to being able to introduce more books from Japan to English audiences in the future. Keep an eye open for my name, because I don't plan on stopping here!

Thank you!

-Braden Noyes

email: braden.noyes@gmail.com

website: http://www.bradennoyes.com

Message from the Translators 2: Mami Suzuki

I really appreciate being given such a great opportunity to translate the story, Alice's tale. Although I write English articles on tofugu.com, and often translate other articles, interviews and documents for people I work with, translating a short story was much different. It was rather difficult because I needed the proper vocabulary to depict each situation, each character's personality, and make the bridge between Japanese and English. I actually only made the first draft, and the co-translator, Braden, put forth his skills in a job very well done to make this story a great read for English people. Seeing how a native English speaker changed my translation into science fiction English was a great opportunity to learn English as well. I would like to mention that he is a great translator. Thank you Braden, and thank you Conyac for giving me this opportunity. Thank you, also, to the publisher Impress-san and the author Kurashita san. I hope every English reader of this story will enjoy the final product as much as I did.

-Mami Suzuki
Twitter: @MamiFugu

The Internet's answer to translation
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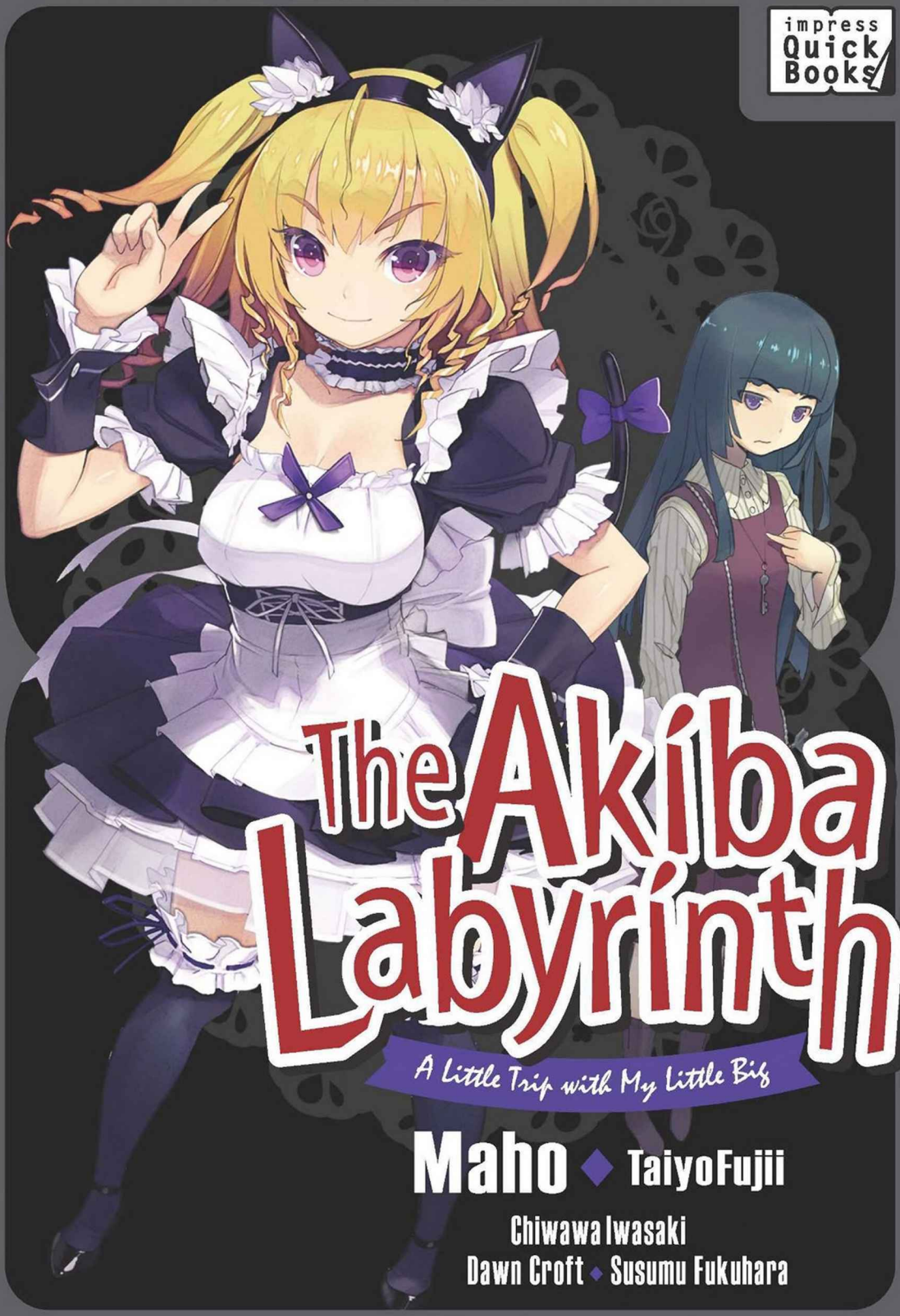
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